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The Oldest Abolition Society

BEING A

SHORT STORY

OF THE LABORS OF THE

Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition
of Slavery, the Relief of Free Negroes Un-
lawfully Held in Bondage, and for
Improving the Condition of
the African Race.

*Pennsylvania Society for Promoting
the Abolition of Slavery*

PHILADELPHIA, PA.

PUBLISHED FOR THE SOCIETY

1911

Pennsylvania Abolition Society

ORGANIZED IN 1775

Two Early Presidents—Dr. Benjamin Rush,
Dr. Benjamin Franklin

PRESENT OFFICERS

PRESIDENT, HENRY W. WILBUR, 140 NORTH 15TH
ST., PHILADELPHIA, PA.

VICE PRESIDENTS, ALFRED H. LOVE, JOEL BORTON

SECRETARY, ELWOOD HEACOCK, 2027 NORTH COL-
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The Oldest Abolition Society

When the war for independence began, and while the Continental Congress was busy considering the rights of man, and was formulating axiomatic statements about liberty and equality, ten thousand slaves were held by Pennsylvania task-masters, and a half a million of our black brothers and sisters were bound to service in all of the American colonies. Slavery existed at that time in every one of the original thirteen states, which a little later helped form "the more perfect union."

It is true that many of the patriots of the colonial and the early constitutional period, both in the North and in the South, regretted the presence of the peculiar institution, and hoped for its future disappearance. Among this number were many slaveholders, such as Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry. As an offset to this nominal anti-slavery sentiment, was a collection of vigorous and united men from what later became the "cotton states," who noisily and belligerently contended for the maintenance of the institution. They secured the constitutional guarantees for slavery, and were the sires of the men who pressed the issue to the final effort to overthrow the Union.

In more ways than one the year 1775 stands out boldly as an epoch in the development of the abolition movement. During this year Warner Mifflin, a Delaware Friend, manumitted his slaves, and on the 14th of Fourth month a small group of men, mostly members, of the Society of Friends, organized the "Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, and for **Improving the Condition of the African Race.**" The long name adopted by the Society contained a broad commission, and afforded ample reason for its continued existence.

The Society had a fitful and feeble existence for a few months, and temporarily suspended on account of the excitement and exigencies of the revolutionary period. It remained unknown and inactive until Tenth month 2nd, 1784, when it was reorganized, to uninterruptedly exist until the present time. The Society was legally incorporated in 1789.

During this year what is now the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting sent a memorial in behalf of the abolition of slavery to the infant United States Congress. Within a few days, Second month 12th, a petition of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, signed by its venerable President, Benjamin Franklin, appeared in the Congress. This was one of the last

official acts of the celebrated philosopher and diplomat, as in a few weeks Franklin passed away.

This petition was almost a prophetic document. Its initial paragraph was alive with the spirit which inspired and characterized the Declaration of Independence. We quote:

“From a persuasion that equal liberty was originally the portion, and is still the birthright of all men, and influenced by the strongest ties of humanity, and the principles of their institution, your memorialists conceive themselves bound to use all justifiable endeavors to loosen the bands of slavery and to promote a general enjoyment of the blessing of freedom. Under these impressions, they earnestly entreat your serious attention to the subject of slavery, that you would be pleased to countenance the restoration of liberty to those unhappy men, who alone in this land of freedom are degraded into perpetual bondage, and who amidst the general joy of surrounding freemen, are groaning in servile subjection; that you will devise means for removing this inconsistency from the character of the American people; that you will promote mercy and justice towards this distressed race, and that you will step to the very verge of the powers vested in you, for discouraging every species of traffic in the persons of our fellow men.”

During the lapse of nearly a century and a quarter since this document was formulated, it is doubtful if the major and controlling public opinion of the country has caught up with the ideals voiced by

Franklin and his associates for dealing with the colored people.

Both the Quaker memorial and the Abolition Society's petition were debated vigorously in Congress. Some of the ultra Southern brethren were rather severe in referring to the "disturbing" character of both documents. One representative contemptuously remarked that the Quakers had appeared in Congress "to meddle in a business in which they had nothing to do." This utterance contained all the venom in solution which finally characterized pro-slavery oratory and literature. It has to be said, however, that the memorial and the petition were referred to the proper committee, by a substantial majority, and were finally reported back to the House. The report was properly spread on the records as a sort of historical milestone, no other action being accorded either the memorial or the petition. There is little reason to believe that at any subsequent time for three-quarters of a century even that much consideration would have been shown an anti-slavery petition by the National Congress.

Another forward movement was taken by the Abolition Society in 1789. A committee of twenty-four members, divided into four sub-committees, was to give attention to the following concerns:

"1st. A Committee of Inspection, whose duty

should be to superintend the morals, general conduct, and ordinary situation of the free negroes, to afford them advice and instruction, and protect them from wrongs."

"2d. A Committee of Guardians, for placing out children with suitable persons, that they may learn some trade, or other means of subsistence by regular but reasonable apprenticeship."

3d. A Committee of Education, who were to superintend the school instruction of the children and youth of free blacks. This branch of the committee was also charged to procure and preserve a regular record of the marriages, births and manumissions of all free blacks."

"4th. A Committee of Employ, who were to endeavor to procure constant employment for those free negroes who are able to work, the want of which would occasion poverty, idleness and many vicious habits."

Pennsylvania having enacted a gradual emancipation law in 1780, in 1791 a bill was introduced in the Assembly, which if made a law would have permitted officers of the United States Government to hold slaves in this state. The Abolition Society organized and conducted a vigorous opposition to the bill, which was subsequently defeated. The Society thus scored its first substantial legislative victory.

In 1813 the Society opened a school in a building erected for the purpose on Cherry Street, for the

education of colored children. In 1815, by resolution of the Society, this building was named Clarkson Hall, in honor of the English Abolitionist, Thomas Clarkson.

There are frequent references to memorials to the Legislature and Congress on various phases of the Abolition question, but the Society had its period of ups and downs, the gradual emancipation in Pennsylvania rendering its local work less necessary. The general apathy which seemed to come over the whole country after the invention of the cotton gin, and the enlarged financial interest thus conferred upon the institution of slavery, had its effect upon the Society.

In 1818, when the colonization movement was inaugurated, the Society gave some attention to the matter, but with no very active sympathy in the movement. It seems to have, in the main, approved the position of the American Anti-Slavery Convention, that emancipation should precede colonization.

It co-operated by resolution and otherwise in the futile attempt to make the territory of Missouri a free state.

In 1820, the Society memorialized the Legislature for the immediate abolition of all slaves in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, who were still

held in bondage under the provisions of the gradual emancipation act.

In 1823, the state of Maryland by legislative resolution, entered a complaint against the difficulty of recapturing fugitive slaves in Pennsylvania who had escaped from the state of Maryland, and it was suggested that this state prohibit the settlement of people of color within its borders. A committee of the Abolition Society replied somewhat vigorously to this strange suggestion on the part of the state of Maryland.

In 1823, resolutions were adopted in condemnation of South Carolina for its treatment of free colored people coming into the state from outside its borders. It was provided by statute that any free person of color entering the state on a vessel or otherwise, should be committed and detained in jail until the departure of the vessel, and if the expenses connected with the detention of such person were not paid, they would be sold into slavery.

The Society was energetic in memorializing Congress in behalf of the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. It also gave substantial support and encouragement to Benjamin Lundy when he began his abolition propaganda by the publication of "The Genius of Universal Emancipation."

With the perfection of the abolition of slavery in the state of Pennsylvania, very many free colored

people were subjected to annoyances, and were not infrequently kidnapped. The Pennsylvania Abolition Society was energetic in petitioning the Legislature for a redress of these grievances.

It may be conceived that the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, was, in the main, a conservative institution, standing firmly in favor of gradual emancipation, but when the full-fledged emancipation of slavery appeared on the scene, it gave support to the question of immediate emancipation with dignity and positiveness.

In 1837, a concern arose in the Society for a more close investigation of the condition of colored people, and a committee was appointed to visit such persons in their families, public meetings and other institutions, and to gather statistical information in regard to the same.

With the intensification of the slavery question, the Pennsylvania Society more and more lined up with the ideals contained in its name, and anticipated in its charter. Its roll of members contained the names of a number of the most strenuous abolitionists in our own and other lands, not confining its members to citizens of Pennsylvania. From outside the United States, Thomas Clarkson, Granville Sharp, William Pitt, and William Wilberforce, of England, and L'Abbe Raynal, of France, were members. At home, such non-residents as Joshua

R. Giddings, William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass, were on the roll, and at an earlier period John Jay, of New York, first Chief Justice of the United States, was not ashamed to be associated with the men belonging to this Society.

Among the well-known Pennsylvanians who became associated with the Society, and famous as abolitionists, were Passmore Williamson, Isaac T. Hopper, Daniel Neal, James Mott and Edward Hopper. Going back to the colonial and early constitutional period, we find Dr. George Logan, grandson of Penn's secretary, and for six years United States senator, among the members. In the list of officers given further on in this story, will be found not a few famous Pennsylvanians.

During the period from 1835 until the abolition of slavery, the Abolition Society was more or less effective in most of the efforts looking towards emancipation. In the "petition" campaign, forwarded by the venerable John Quincy Adams, this Society took a considerable part.

After the passage of the fugitive slave law by Congress in 1851, there was consternation among the colored people of Philadelphia, for fear that the law would annoy the free men and women of the race, as well as imperil the fugitives from slavery who might be resident here. To allay these fears the Abolition Society published an address counsel-

ing forbearance under the accumulated wrongs inflicted upon the race. This address was distributed by the Society's Visiting Committee in person.

The Acting Committee of the Society did a large amount of work in the period from 1849 on to the coming of the Civil War, in attempting to secure justice for free negroes who were harrassed by kidnappers, and in securing the liberation of such of them as were actually stolen by kidnappers. It also made a successful effort to procure the release of three free men who were confined in jail at Norfolk, Virginia, in consequence of an attempt of a sea captain to sell them into slavery. Many of the efforts of the committee were crowned with success.

It is interesting to note that in 1852, the Society disbursed \$5,378.12 in its various activities, the larger part being for educational purposes.

In 1856 the Society issued a report being a statistical inquiry into the condition of the colored people in Philadelphia. The report was prepared by Benjamin C. Bacon, and published by order of the Society. This is an exceedingly interesting compilation, especially so in view of the fact that there were a number of private schools conducted at that time for the benefit of the colored people. There were in the Sabbath Schcols of the city, 1,677 colored children, and at that time 9,000 adult colored persons over twenty years of age residing in

Philadelphia. About one-seventh of them were able to read and write. More than one-third of them were born in slavery, and one-eighth of the number had been manumitted. There were 1,600 and over engaged in work as skilled laborers. The report went quite extensively into the criminal statistics of the city, showing that the colored people represented seventeen per cent. of the criminal population in the Eastern Penitentiary.

As nearly as we can ascertain from the records and published statements of the Society from time to time, it is evident that at the beginning and for the major part of its existence, it was purely a men's organization. It is less than a generation ago that the names of women appear on its roll of members. For an organization at the beginning, and all along the line, so largely composed of Friends, this ignoring of women seems, to say the least, strange.

It should be remembered that it was not until some time after the civil war, that colored people were accorded transit privileges on the Philadelphia street cars. In the effort to remove this repressive rule, and permit colored persons to be passengers on these public service conveyances, the Abolition Society bore an honorable part.

From time to time the Pennsylvania Abolition Society has received certain bequests, the proceeds of which it has distributed according to its best

judgment for the improvement of the people of color in Philadelphia and elsewhere.

In 1894, in addition to its other obligations, this Society became the trustee of the Laing School at Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina. This relation was created at the request of the late Henry M. Laing. The Society holds trust deeds to all of the school property at Mt. Pleasant, occupied by the colored school managed by Abby D. Munro. It also holds and administers the endowment fund of the Laing School, paying the proceeds to the manager of the school.

For a number of years the distribution of its own income, and the administration of the Laing School fund, has constituted the bulk of the Society's labors. That its work under its title and charter could be very much enlarged, admits of no doubt.

From various statements in the past literature of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, the assertion seems warranted that it was the first regularly organized society in this country formed with the purpose to produce the elimination of the institution of slavery from the United States. With an honorable but quiet record for 136 years behind it, if one were writing prophesy rather than history, the temptation would be strong to suggest an increase of the resources, and an enlarged activity of the Society. It might well become the clearing

house for calm and orderly efforts to remove race prejudice, and increase humane efforts in behalf of justice, in the midst of the present condition of the race question.

The following list contains the names of the officers, excepting Vice Presidents, from the founding of the Society down to date:

Presidents

John Baldwin,	William Wayne, Jr.
Samuel Richards,	Thomas Shipley
James Whiteall,	Edward Needles
Thomas Meredith,	Dr. Joseph Parrish
Dr. Benjamin Rush,	Dillwyn Parrish
Jonathan Penrose,	Passmore Williamson
James Pemberton	¹ William Still
Dr. Benjamin Franklin	Howard M. Jenkins
Dr. Casper Wistar, Jr.	Samuel S. Ash
William Rowle	Henry W. Wilbur

Secretaries

Thomas Harrison	Nathan Smith
John Todd	Benjamin Williams
Tench Cox	Joseph Parker
John McCree	Abraham L. Pennock
Joseph Parker Norris	James Mott, Jr.
Joseph Sansom	Blakey Sharpless
James Todd	Thomas Ridgway
Benjamin Kite	Samuel Mason, Jr.
Walter Franklin	Edward B. Garrigues
Timothy Paxson	Dr. Edwin Atlee
James Milnor	Edwin Walter
Samuel Harvey	James R. Wilson
John Bacon	George Griscom

¹The only colored man who ever served as President.

Secretaries, (Continued)

Benjamin C. Bacon
William C. Betts
Edward Hopper
Lewis C. Gunn
Dr. Joshua Rhoads
Daniel Neall, Jr.
William D. Parrish
Joseph Lindsay

Haworth Wetherald
Edward Lewis
Passmore Williamson
Joseph Healey
Joseph M. Truman, Jr.
Amos Hillborn
William Heacock
Lukens Webster

Ellwood Heacock

Treasurers

James Starr
John Evans
Thomas Phipps
Henry Troth
Peter Wright

Caleb Clothier
Henry M. Laing
John P. Townsend
William S. Ingram
D. Henry Wright

Howard Roberts





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